



Betania at the Jordan River, considered to be the site of the Baptism of Jesus

BAPTISM LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

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Christopher Michael Jones, Guest Lectionary Commentator
Pastor, First Baptist Church of Hillside, Hillside, NJ

Lection – John 3:1-10 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 1) Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. (v. 2) He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” (v. 3) Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” (v. 4) Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” (v. 5) Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. (v. 6) What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. (v. 7) Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ (v. 8) The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear

the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” (v. 9) Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” (v. 10) Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?”

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

The sacred act of baptism is believed by the Christian Church to represent a human response to the saving grace of God offered through faith in Jesus Christ. In baptism, a person demonstrates publically an inner awareness of the need for repentance toward God and a willingness to submit to God’s will as the Divine Creator. As much as the baptism of Jesus is believed to signify to the Christian Church Jesus’ willingness to surrender to the perfect will of God, the Christian’s baptism is also believed to signify to the Christian community the Christian’s desire to surrender to the perfect will of God and the teachings of Jesus Christ (Matthew 3:13-17). While this ritualistic act is usually rendered in public, it is also a very personal response to the grace of God offered before the baptismal event. God’s grace is rendered to the Christian prior to baptism, beginning with the birth, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and properly received upon the Christian’s acceptance of Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.

Some African American churches place a strong emphasis on a high liturgical approach to the baptismal ceremony. Others place a stronger emphasis on the quality of the fellowship, sharing of gifts, and reception often given after baptism. There are churches that do both. In either case, the baptismal act is believed to be the pivot in the Christian’s life, the moment when the Christian stands publically on the inner belief that “all things are become new” (2 Cor. 5:17).

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: John 3:1-10

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

I can still recount my baptism experience vividly. Having recently given up a life as a very successful Hip-Hop and R & B record producer, nothing seemed more important to me than putting on that white baptismal robe and walking down the steps of that baptismal pool in a small church in the South Bronx. No longer would I be identified by the diamond crusted earrings, platinum chains, and Pelle Pelle motorcycle jackets I often wore in Hip-Hop videos. I experienced real change in my life, and I wanted the baptismal event to signify to the world that I was flipping the script on my next debut single: Reborn Rapper.

What I remember very clearly was that my newly found community of faith wanted me to be a part of them as much as I wanted to be a part of them. With every step downward, and every audible cheer sent upward, it seemed as if my own sense of inner healing was being experienced by the community of faith that embraced me.

Baptism symbolized for me not only the presence of authentic redemption within my soul, but the unending presence of hope and redemption in the hood from which I had been saved. My inner desire to participate in the baptismal ceremony was intractably attached to my awareness that God not only offered the same life-saving invitation of grace to the church, God offered this same invitation to the outer urban community of which I was a part.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

In John 3:1-10, we are given the account of an intimate encounter between a learned religious man concerned about his soul's salvation and the one from whom salvation comes. John wants the reader to know that although Nicodemus sat quite close to the giver of life, Nicodemus' understanding of how God's gift of life is received remained far away.

Most biblical scholars confirm that Nicodemus the Pharisee belonged to the Jewish council, the Sanhedrin (v. 1). The Sanhedrin was the religious sect that maintained God was not the God of the dead but of the living, and that after life on earth, those who believed in the God of Israel enjoyed a better life beyond the grave (see Acts 24:15, 15). It is safe to assume Nicodemus subscribed to such teachings. John's recorded encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus was no small matter. Nicodemus was not just an *average* Pharisee. Clearly Jesus considered Nicodemus to be the Pharisee's most illustrious scholar, stating "*Su ei ho didaskalos tou Israel...*" In other words, "Art thou *the* teacher of Israel?" and not just "*a*" teacher of Israel.

According to John, Nicodemus begins his dialogue with Jesus by confessing his acknowledgment of the miracles of Jesus and rightly attributing them to God (v. 2). Nicodemus, being a Pharisee, had no problem admitting that God had "to be in it," since the works of Jesus were considered powerful and beyond reproach. So, the question regarding the source from which Jesus' ministry came was not the issue. To the contrary, Nicodemus appears under the cover of night to determine whether or not the *law and the prophecies* were finally being fulfilled in Jesus, knowing precisely what they foretold.

Nicodemus undoubtedly heard unlimited accounts of the new Rabbi who shut it down in the pulpit at revival, healed the leper in the back of the church by the food pantry, and restored the politically oppressed to their rightful place in society. Since everybody in the hood was saying that Jesus was the One, Nicodemus wanted to know for himself: Could this be true? Is Jesus the One? And if not, who else could be a better Messiah than Jesus?

Grasping the true nature of Nicodemus' visit, Jesus puts Nicodemus out of his misery by dropping a theological bomb shell. Jesus tells Nicodemus he knows what Nicodemus is looking for, but he won't be able to find it unless he is "born from above" (v. 3). Jesus argues, unless a person "be born from above" such a person will not be able to fathom the kingdom of God or how the Messiah reigns within it.

Here lies the meat of the dialogue. Scholars contend Nicodemus held to the assumption that a person had to strive to bring his or her personal piety into conformity with all that God revealed in *the law and prophecies*. A person only lived one life, and that life had to be well-lived if one were to hope to secure an entrance-way to the kingdom of God. By suggesting that a person's old way of life, at its best, was unacceptable to God, Jesus called for the demolition of Nicodemus' theological and political frameworks (v. 4). According to Jesus, one would need to experience a "baptism into a new life" if one desired to gain entrance into the kingdom. One would need to experience a regeneration of the soul before one could benefit from the change of heart for which Nicodemus searched. The former life may be pleasurable, filled with accomplishment, and even

some meaning, but apart from a new birth it is still *the old life*. Jesus seeks to convey the notion that God's purpose in Jesus was not to improve the old way of life, but to transmit a new way of living; a new life in the Spirit.

In contrasting the difference between an earthly family and a heavenly family, Jesus makes a clear distinction between how one is birthed in the Spirit as opposed to the natural realm (vv. 5-8). Jesus uses water and wind as an analogy. Much in the way earthly parents transmit life and a child grows, Jesus contends God transmits life via the Spirit, making its recipient, regardless of age or social status, a newborn, the inheritor of a second birth. It is here where the underpinnings of all church traditions void of the Spirit unravel.

New Testament scholar Ivor Powell argues Jesus' usage of the terms "water" and "wind" is powerful in that in the beginning of Genesis, all things natural became waste and void. Powell argues Jesus enlisted the terms "water" and "wind" from the Genesis account to prove his point on the necessity for a rebirthing (baptism) in the Spirit:

- (1) The Spirit moved upon the face of the deep;
- (2) God spoke the creative word;
- (3) The light shone forth.

The New Testament reveals a similar pattern in the redemption of humanity:

- (1) "And when he (the Spirit) is come, he will reprove the world of sin" (John 16:8);
- (2) "Go ye into all the world and preach the Gospel..." [the creative word] (Mark 16:16);
- (3) "For God who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (II Corinthians 4:6).

For Powell, the necessity for baptism (i.e. a rebirthing by way of the Holy Spirit) was a doctrine of spiritual regeneration which Nicodemus had not heard before or understood. Much like the wind, God is the author of change; God is Spirit. Much like the water, God's movement is fluid and unpredictable. Being "born again" is an act of God's grace that cannot be contained or controlled by earthly wisdom or earthly means.¹

By virtue of Nicodemus being *the* teacher and not just *a* teacher, Jesus asked why Nicodemus had not grasped this teaching. In implying that Nicodemus should have known, Jesus wants to infer that the Old Testament, beginning from the beginning of Genesis, proves his teachings to be true (vv. 9-10). However, without the presence of the Holy Spirit, one cannot understand the Spirit behind the *law and the prophecies*.

It has been taught that Jesus' statement "born from water" (i.e., "born from above") referred to the act of baptism itself, that baptism is an essential to one receiving salvation. To the contrary, the New Testament gives countless examples of persons who were baptized *after* having been converted (Acts 8:36-39, 9:18, 10:47). It has also been taught that faith without baptism is meaningless and considered to be void in its validity. Such teachings are unbiblical and simply not true. Beginning with the believer in Luke 23:43, there will be many in heaven who have

never experienced baptism in their lifetime on earth. What matters is that the Church remains in communion with the Spirit who invokes the ritual act and not be consumed with the performance of the act itself.

Celebration

An old song still heard in black churches says, “Take me to the water. Take me to the water. Take me to the water, to be baptized.” Then, depending upon the region of the country in which you live and your faith community, you add specific additional verses. For me, an additional verse would be, “I love Jesus. I love Jesus. I love Jesus, yes I do. I thank God for the baptism that brought me out of darkness into the marvelous light.” Next verse, “Now I got the Spirit. Now I got the Spirit. Now I got the Spirit, yes I do.”

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details of this passage include:

Sounds: Nicodemus walking to meet Jesus at night; Jesus and Nicodemus in conversation; the sound of the wind blowing in the middle of the night; The deafening silence that follows the wind after it has run its course; and

Sights: A child coming forth from the womb; a person being reborn after they are old; and the unending sound of tranquil water.

Notes

1. Powell, Ivor. John's Wonderful Gospel. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1983. p. 76.